Charisma, Control, and Community: A Socio-Psychological Study of Contemporary Indian Religious Cults

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Abstract:

This study examines why some charismatic spiritual movements disintegrate following scandal, while others endure by comparing the trajectories of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho) and Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh's Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS). Drawing on Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority, the paper analyses how charisma is constructed, stabilised, and transformed through psychological, institutional, and ritual mechanisms.

Osho's movement was characterised by an explicitly anti-institutional ethos, therapeutic experimentation, and a form of practised charisma centred on individual liberation. However, its decentralised authority structure limited the routinisation of charisma. The collapse of Rajneeshpuram, precipitated by internal power struggles and the 1984 bioterror attack, demonstrates how charisma fragments when it fails to institutionalise beyond the leader's presence. In contrast, Dera Sacha Sauda developed a highly structured organisational apparatus under Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, integrating seva-based discipline, confession rituals, mass spectacles, and strategic political alliances. Through tightly choreographed collective practices and mediated affect, DSS produced a routinised charisma embedded in followers' emotional and social worlds. The movement's persistence following Singh's 2017 conviction illustrates how charismatic authority can outlive personal legitimacy when institutional and psychological commitments are deeply entrenched.

By synthesising Weberian sociology with cognitive dissonance theory, social identity theory, Lifton's model of thought reform, and groupthink dynamics, the study argues that charismatic authority survives not through personal magnetism alone but through institutionalisation, emotional synchrony, welfare dependency, and the production of durable collective identities.

Keywords: *Charismatic authority; routinisation of charisma; spiritual movements; Dera Sacha Sauda; Osho; cognitive dissonance; groupthink*

Introduction:

Religious cults occupy a complex position in the study of faith, society, and psychology. Although popularly associated with manipulation, coercion, or extremism, they represent distinctive social formations that illuminate how belief, belonging, and authority operate under modern conditions. Cults often emerge when institutional religions lose credibility, when individuals experience existential uncertainty, or when charismatic figures offer compelling alternatives to conventional forms of spirituality. The study of cults thus invites a multidisciplinary inquiry into how

social structures, psychological needs, and symbolic authority converge to produce intense forms of collective life.

Historically, the term cult has carried pejorative connotations, functioning as a label for deviant, heretical, or dangerous religious movements. However, within sociological and psychological literature, the concept is used in a more neutral and analytical sense to describe highly organised communities centred on alternative beliefs and intense personal commitment. Cults are characterised by strong internal hierarchies, centralised control, and a shared worldview that distinguishes them from mainstream religions. They are formed by emotional fusion, affective discipline, and the total integration of personal identity with collective purpose.

Max Weber's typology of authority situates such groups within the sphere of charismatic authority, where legitimacy stems from devotion to a leader believed to possess exceptional or sacred qualities.[1] Weber contrasted this with traditional authority, based on inherited customs, and rational-legal authority, grounded in bureaucratic rules and institutions. Charismatic authority depends on personal magnetism and followers' emotional investment, making it highly unstable yet deeply powerful. Unlike institutional or traditional authority, charisma operates through emotional identification rather than legal or doctrinal sanction. This makes cultic organisations dynamic yet unstable: they depend heavily on the leader's personal magnetism, yet can evolve into routinised systems once charisma becomes institutionalised.

Cults frequently arise as offshoots of mainstream religious traditions, reinterpreting established doctrines to address perceived moral or spiritual failures of the parent institutions. Émile Durkheim viewed religion not as belief in the supernatural but as a mechanism for maintaining social cohesion.[2] Religion, he argued, binds individuals through shared symbols, rituals, and moral norms, producing collective effervescence, a heightened sense of unity experienced during collective gatherings.

Modernity, with its emphasis on individualism and rationality, weakens these communal ties. As a result, cults can be seen as compensatory spaces that restore moral order and belonging. They thrive where existing institutions—religious, political, or familial—fail to provide emotional security, recognition, or moral coherence. In this sense, cults function as adaptive social responses to anomie, the state of normlessness Durkheim identified as characteristic of modern life.

From a psychological viewpoint, participation in cults reflects not simple coercion but active engagement with structures that promise meaning and stability. Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon.[3] Festinger proposed that individuals experience psychological discomfort when their beliefs and behaviours are inconsistent,

Max Weber, **Economy and Society**, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 241–248, Internet [1] Archive,

Émile Durkheim, Suicide: A Study in Sociology, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1951), 241–260, accessed via [2] University of Calicut,

Leon Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 3–5.[3]

motivating them to reduce this tension by altering perceptions or justifying actions. Within cults, this manifests when members encounter evidence that contradicts the leader's claims. Rather than abandoning their beliefs, followers often reinterpret inconsistencies as tests of faith or signs of deeper truth, preserving emotional and ideological commitment.

Social Identity Theory also clarifies the psychological appeal of cults: by joining a distinct and exclusive group, individuals derive self-worth and coherence from collective identity.[4] Cult membership satisfies fundamental needs for recognition, certainty, and emotional connection. The boundary between individual and collective becomes blurred, producing what scholars describe as a fusion of self and community.

Cults maintain cohesion through ritual, discipline, and social reinforcement. Rituals generate emotional intensity and reaffirm shared values, while behavioural regulations provide members with a clear moral structure. These mechanisms are not always experienced as oppressive; they are often embraced as sources of order and clarity. Through communal living, shared language, and repetitive symbolic practices, members internalise the group's worldview and reproduce its authority. From a sociological standpoint, these processes demonstrate how ideology and everyday life intertwine to sustain belief. Control in cultic contexts often relies less on force than on affective bonds—trust, love, and loyalty between members and their leader.

Charismatic leadership is central to the formation and endurance of cults. The leader's authority derives from perceived transcendence or exceptional insight, often reinforced through ritualised devotion and isolation from critique. Followers invest the leader with the power to define truth, morality, and salvation. Psychodynamically, this relationship involves transference and projection: the leader becomes a symbolic vessel for followers' ideal selves and unmet desires.[5] Over time, charisma becomes routinised, as the leader's personal magnetism transforms into institutional authority.[6] This process strengthens internal coherence and insulates the group from external rational or moral scrutiny. Weber described charismatic authority as legitimacy grounded in an individual's exceptional qualities. Such authority relies on followers' emotional devotion and belief in the leader's unique access to truth. Within cultic settings, charisma is amplified through ritualised reverence, isolation from external influence, and the creation of a narrative in which the leader embodies salvation itself.

This theory is exemplified by Jim Jones, an American cult leader and founder of the Peoples Temple, who presented himself as a divine messenger and social reformer. His movement attracted followers through a message of racial equality and communal utopia. Over time, his authority expanded into absolute control, where dissent equalled betrayal of faith. The 1978 Jonestown tragedy, in which over nine hundred members died in a mass suicide-murder, revealed how charisma, when

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Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations, ed. William G. [4] Austin and Stephen Worchel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 33–47
"Freud's Defense Mechanisms: Ego Protection," Psychology.town[5]
Weber, Economy and Society[6]

detached from moral or institutional checks, can transform devotion into coercion and collective destruction.[7]

David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, embodied another manifestation of charismatic power, claiming to be the final interpreter of biblical prophecy. Koresh convinced followers they were chosen participants in a divine end-time drama. His control over members' spiritual and personal lives was justified through apocalyptic belief and emotional dependency. The 1993 Waco siege, culminating in confrontation with federal authorities, exposed how charismatic authority can foster insular worldviews, emotional dependency, and collective defiance of external legitimacy.[8]

From a psychodynamic perspective, such leadership operates through transference and projection, as followers displace their idealised selves onto the leader, who becomes a symbolic embodiment of perfection and authority. Over time, this charisma crystallises into institutional and doctrinal frameworks that preserve the leader's influence, stabilising internal cohesion while reinforcing ideological conformity.[9]

Understanding religious cults requires moving beyond binary frameworks of manipulation versus agency or faith versus delusion. They must instead be studied as hybrid formations combining psychological need, social organisation, and symbolic power. Through this lens, cults emerge not as aberrations but as expressions of enduring human efforts to create meaning and belonging in uncertain worlds. They represent both the resilience of faith and the fragility of social order.

Research Gap:

Scholarship on Indian religious cults remains conceptually fragmented. Existing studies typically isolate charismatic authority, psychological influence, or communal organisation rather than examining how these forces work together to sustain long-term devotion. Research on movements such as Osho and Dera Sacha Sauda often centres on scandal or public controversy, leaving understudied the everyday emotional, cognitive, and relational processes through which followers internalise belief and develop enduring attachment. There is also limited engagement with how these groups respond to the moral uncertainty, social instability, and search for meaning characteristic of contemporary Indian society. A further gap concerns the evolution of charisma itself. While the rise of charismatic movements is well documented, far less attention is given to how initial phases of experimentation, reform, or spiritual innovation shift over time into rigid hierarchy, concentrated power, and forms of institutional or moral degeneration. This transformation is particularly underexplored in the Indian context, where early narratives of liberation often give way to dependency, secrecy, and coercive authority. These gaps indicate the need for an integrated framework that brings

Rebecca Moore, Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 88–92.[7]
Stuart A. Wright, Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 134–[8] 136.
Weber, Economy and Society[9]

together psychological mechanisms, cultural narratives, and changing organisational structures in order to explain how charismatic leaders construct, maintain, and transform their legitimacy within modern Indian cultic formations.

Research Question:

Primary/Central RQ: How do charismatic leaders of Indian religious cults, particularly Osho and Dera Sacha Sauda, construct and maintain their legitimacy and authority within their cults?

Subsidiary Research Questions:

1. Which specific psychological processes enable charismatic leaders to consolidate authority and direct members' behaviour?

2. How do religious cults construct forms of belonging, intimacy and community that mainstream religious structures fail to provide, and how do these affect the members' emotional and psychological attachment to the group?

3. How do internal psychological mechanisms and group-based identity processes sustain members' long-term belief and compliance, even in the face of contradictory evidence or harmful practices?

4. In what ways do these cults reconstruct spirituality and community in response to the moral and emotional vacuums of modern Indian society?

Hypothesis:

This study hypothesises that charismatic authority in Indian religious cults endures only when a leader's personal charisma is successfully converted into institutional routines and internalised psychological dependence, and that it degenerates when this conversion fails.

Case Studies:

a) Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho)

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, subsequently identified as Osho, constitutes a salient case study in the dynamics of charismatic leadership within contemporary India. The trajectory of his movement, evolving from a nascent gathering of disciples in the 1960s to a prominent international commune and ultimately a global spiritual enterprise, delineates the complex interplay among individual charisma, psychological predispositions, and institutional power in the genesis and perpetuation of modern religious cults.

Chandra Mohan Jain was born into a modest Jain family in Kuchwada, Madhya Pradesh, in 1931. His early life was profoundly shaped by significant encounters with mortality; specifically, the loss of his grandfather during childhood and the sudden demise of his teenage sweetheart, Shashi, constituted deeply impactful experiences. In his later writings, Osho recounted these events as catalysts for his spiritual awakening. At the age of twenty-one, he described experiencing samadhi, a state of liberation, while seated beneath a maulshree tree, a moment later mythologised by his followers as the

site of enlightenment.

His early career as a lecturer in philosophy at Jabalpur University provided him a platform to articulate his burgeoning spiritual insights, attracting initial followers who were drawn to his unconventional interpretations of religious texts and his charismatic rhetorical style.[10] His public discourses challenged traditional Hinduism, ascetic morality, and Gandhian idealism, positioning him as a radical modern voice.

This phase of emergence aligns closely with Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority, wherein legitimacy derives from followers' belief in a leader's extraordinary qualities.[11] Charismatic authority is inherently unstable, as it rests on personal devotion rather than institutional rules. However, charisma is unstable and deteriorates if the leader cannot produce the changes he promises or when he confronts the contradictory logics and demands of the other types of authority. Rajneesh's oratory was fluent, provocative, and paradoxical, which embodied the performative charisma. By fusing Eastern mysticism with Western psychological idioms, Rajneesh presented himself as a prophet of liberation, suited to the age of existential alienation and sexual repression.

In the early 1970s, the following of Rajneesh expanded significantly, culminating in the establishment of the Shree Rajneesh Ashram in Pune, India. Adherents, referred to as sannyasins[1], renounced their former identities, adopted new names, wore orange robes, and donned malas featuring the guru's photograph, thereby physically signifying their symbolic rebirth into a collective identity.

Although the movement did not require formal fees to become a sannyasin, financial contributions were an unofficial yet integral aspect of participation. Residents paid for accommodation, food, and services while engaging in communal labour. Wealthy followers provided large voluntary donations that supported commune expansion, legal battles, and Osho's famously extravagant lifestyle, creating an "extractive economic structure". An extractive economic system is a large-scale extraction of natural resources or wealth for the benefit of a small elite. While contributions were not overtly coerced, social expectations and centralised financial control made economic participation effectively unavoidable for serious adherents.

The ashram's practices, dynamic meditation, cathartic group therapy, and daily discourses were designed to evoke collective effervescence, a concept developed by Émile Durkheim to describe the shared emotional energy generated through collective ritual.[12] Cathartic therapy involved intense emotional release, producing feelings of euphoria, unity, and cohesion. This emotional synchrony strengthened social bonds, fostering trust and commitment while reinforcing group identity.

These rituals blurred the lines between the spiritual and the psychological, creating what Rajneesh termed "a laboratory for inner transformation", which referred to the commune as a

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Weber, Economy and Society[11]

Elie G. Karam et al., "Collective Effervescence and Social Cohesion," Frontiers in Psychology (2022): 1–12[12]

controlled environment where emotions and identity could be broken down and reshaped.[13] However, this intensity also served to consolidate control. Repetition, symbolic language, and physical synchrony constituted a potent mechanism for emotional conditioning. The shared performance of devotion by members transformed individual will into collective submission, a phenomenon some psychologists describe as identity fusion, a complete overlap of personal and group identity.

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance provides insight into how followers reconciled contradictions within the movement.[14] When confronted with inconsistencies, such as Osho's wealth or material indulgence, followers reinterpreted these as expressions of divine play or higher consciousness. Rather than weakening belief, dissonance deepened emotional investment, as resolving contradictions reinforced devotion. Social Identity Theory further explains how ritual clothing, renaming, and communal living strengthened in-group identification, offering followers moral superiority and a stable sense of purpose. Rajneesh's leadership also functioned through psychodynamic mechanisms. For many, Rajneesh became a surrogate parent, embodying both authority and unconditional acceptance. His teachings reframed obedience as freedom: to surrender was to transcend the ego. This displacement makes the leader appear capable of solving inner conflicts, creating a mix of admiration and dependence.

In 1981, seeking to expand and escape from Indian tax authorities, Rajneesh moved to Oregon, USA, where he and his followers set up Rajneeshpuram, a 64,000-acre community designed as a Utopian city of enlightenment. The municipality had developed its own system of governance. At Rajneeshpuram, power was devolved to an inner circle headed by Ma Anand Sheela, who was the political strategist and enforcer of the guru. The group's attempt to gain political control of Wasco County through local elections was a combination of religious idealism and political ambition writ large. As local resistance grew, the leadership's rhetoric of persecution intensified, reinforcing the solidarity of the group and the moral justification for extreme measures.

The climax of this political conflict was the 1984 Salmonella Typhimurium outbreak in The Dalles, Oregon, the largest bioterror attack in U.S. history. Members of the commune, under Sheela's direction, deliberately contaminated local restaurant salad bars to incapacitate voters and influence county elections. Over 750 people fell ill, though no fatalities occurred. Within the group's leadership, several classic symptoms of groupthink were clearly visible: members stopped voicing doubts, creating a suppression of dissent; creating an illusion of unanimity, a process known as the moral justification of unethical behaviour. Weber's theory of charismatic degeneration is illustrated here: charisma, initially energising and idealistic, became authoritarian once detached from ethical restraint and accountability.[15]

Rajneesh. The Book of Secrets: 112 Meditations to Discover the Mystery Within. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.[13]

Leon Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance.[14]

Weber, Economy and Society[15]

When the conspiracy was ultimately exposed, the commune rapidly disintegrated. Rajneesh, who had maintained seclusion and silence over the preceding years, publicly accused Sheela of betrayal; nevertheless, he was subsequently arrested on charges of immigration fraud and deported. This implosion of Rajneeshpuram highlights the inherent fragility of charismatic authority once its institutional scaffolding collapses. Despite this, the enduring devotion among followers exemplifies the psychological resilience of belief systems even in the aftermath of scandal.

The Rajneesh phenomenon elucidates that involvement in cultic groups interacts with existential and social needs. Followers frequently report experiencing euphoria. These affective states can be understood through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which suggests that individuals become strongly attached to environments that fulfil multiple psychological needs simultaneously.[16] Within the commune, communal living and emotionally intense practices satisfied belongingness needs by providing constant social connection. The movement also met esteem needs by encouraging followers to view themselves as spiritually advancing and morally significant within the group. Finally, the promise of liberation appealed to self-actualisation needs, offering a sense of fulfilment that is rarely accessible in everyday life. By addressing these levels simultaneously, the commune generated a powerful sense of holistic satisfaction that deepened commitment to its ideology and leadership.

From a sociological viewpoint, Osho's movement may be understood as a response to the alienation characteristic of modernity. Following Durkheim's theory of anomie, cultic communities reinstate moral order and collective solidarity in contexts where traditional religious institutions and familial structures fail to provide sufficient social coherence.[17] Daily life in both Pune and Oregon communes adhered to a rigorous regimen comprising sunrise meditation, communal labour, therapeutic sessions, and evening discourses. Rituals such as "Dynamic Meditation", which involved cycles of hyperventilation, screaming, dancing, and silence, were engineered to institute psychological repression and induce emotional catharsis.[18] These were designed by Osho to break down emotional defences and access deeper layers of psychological vulnerability. Catharsis heightened emotional dependence on the community as followers often interpreted this intense relief as evidence of the transformative power of Osho's methods.

Testimonies from former sannyasins reflect how these rituals felt liberating yet coercive. For example, Sarito Carroll, who joined the commune as a child and grew up in Rajneeshpuram, later described how the emotional intensity masked manipulation. She has said that although she enjoyed a sense of belonging at first, she came to realise that "under the guise of spiritual freedom" there was neglect, exploitation, and even abuse.[19] Carroll's later reflections explain how what felt like freedom

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EBSCO Research Starters, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs,"[16]
Durkheim, Suicide, 214–216.[17]

[18] Authentic Leadership Centre. "Catharsis in Psychotherapy." 2020

Sarito Carroll, "In the Shadow of Enlightenment[19]

often served to bind her more deeply to group dynamics: her vulnerability during such cathartic moments was later interpreted as spiritual growth, but in hindsight, she recognised how emotionally fragile she had become, dependent on the community's rhythm and its approval.[20]

The movement attracted a socioeconomically diverse yet ideologically homogeneous membership, consisting largely of educated, middle-class spiritual seekers from India, Europe, and North America searching for meaning beyond conventional religion. Studies at Rajneeshpuram found a high proportion of college-educated adherents with prior therapeutic exposure, indicating a predisposition toward experiential spirituality.[21] Although women occupied prominent administrative roles, most notably Ma Anand Sheela, Osho's doctrine of sexual liberation also enabled gender exploitation. While framed as emancipatory, the rhetoric of "free love" and the erosion of sexual boundaries normalised predatory behaviour and silenced dissent.

Osho's movement exemplifies how charismatic leadership evolves through distinct phases: emergence, institutionalisation, routinisation, degeneration, and ultimately, disintegration. His leadership drew followers through a blend of intellectual seduction and emotional contagion. Yet, as Max Weber warned, charisma is inherently unstable; it tends to degenerate into domination.[22] This degeneration was visible in Rajneeshpuram, where escalating coercion and the consolidation of power under Sheela catalysed the commune's collapse. To reduce Rajneesh to manipulation alone, however, would be reductive. His success reveals that such movements fulfil genuine psychological and social needs. The Rajneesh case, therefore, illuminates the continuum between faith and fanaticism, liberation and control, and demonstrates how charisma, once corrupted, can accelerate a movement's own disintegration.

b) Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan (Dera Sacha Sauda):

Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS), founded in 1948 by Shah Mastana Balochistani in Sirsa, Haryana, originated as a reformist spiritual organisation. The social tensions of post-Partition northern India shaped the origins of DSS under Shah Mastana. He attracted people through an emphasis on work ethic, mutual respect, and spiritual introspection. His successors continued this trajectory, but the rise of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan in 1990 marked a significant turning point.

Its early appeal lay in its fusion of devotional simplicity with practical service, which provided followers with both spiritual legitimacy and material assistance. These initiatives enhanced the Dera's credibility and cultivated a widespread image of benevolence. The dual structure, faith combined with welfare, positioned DSS as a populist spiritual movement oriented towards marginalised and lower-income groups seeking stability amid economic insecurity. As a result, DSS became a socio-religious sanctuary for communities excluded from mainstream religious and political systems.

Sarito Carroll, "Testimony on Childhood Experiences in Rajneeshpuram[20]
University of Oregon, "Survey of Sannyasins at Rajneeshpuram[21]
Weber, Economy and Society[22]

Unlike his predecessors, Ram Rahim actively rebranded the Dera into a mass-appeal cultural institution. For many rural followers, DSS offered a rare sense of dignity and community. The merging of devotional leadership with pop-cultural aesthetics such as music albums, action films, choreographed spectacles, and flamboyant public appearances consolidated charisma.[23] This media strategy acted as propaganda by shaping followers' views through repeated messaging rather than critical engagement. The satsangs, where Singh delivered sermons that combined entertainment and moral instruction, increased recruitment as they created powerful emotional bonds through synchronised chanting and collective singing. Singh's hybrid persona, part guru, part reformer, part entertainer, allowed DSS to penetrate cultural spaces inaccessible to traditional spiritual organisations, broadening its appeal across rural populations and younger, media-engaged demographics.

Followers often described Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan in superlative spiritual terms, elevating him as divinely guided. At a time when unemployment and social fragmentation created widespread problems, DSS projected an image of purity and reform. Through mass rallies, Singh generated Émile Durkheim's collective strengthening of group identity and moral unity.[24] For many adherents, Singh became a symbolic anchor in an unstable world, offering a sense of clarity.

DSS developed into a highly centralised organisation with Singh occupying the highest authority of both spiritual and administrative authority. All significant decisions were channelled through him, reflecting Weber's model of charismatic authority, where legitimacy is personalised rather than bureaucratic. Beneath Singh operated a multilayered hierarchy of seva coordinators and khas volunteers, who were part of specialised committees, ensuring constant regulation and coordination within the community.

Large-scale welfare campaigns such as the cleanliness drives and environmental projects conducted across major Indian cities became a defining feature of Dera Sacha Sauda's organisational identity. These initiatives were often highly publicised, drawing thousands of volunteers who cleaned markets, bus stands, railway stations, slums, and public parks. In Delhi, for example, DSS volunteers reportedly cleaned nearly 150 locations in a single coordinated drive, a scale few civil society groups could match.[25]

Their medical and disaster-relief activities functioned similarly. During the 2013 Uttarakhand floods, DSS volunteers were documented distributing food supplies and assisting evacuation efforts. These interventions reinforced the perception that DSS filled governance gaps. When the organisation

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[23] Duggal, Koonal. "The 'Vexed' Status of Guru Images: Visuality, Circulation and Iconographic Conflicts." South Asian Popular Culture 20, no. 1 (2022): 97–117.

[24] Durkheim, Suicide, 214–216.

[25] The Wire. "The Mix of Religion, Welfare and Politics That Is Ram Rahim Singh's Dera: Growth of Deras and Their Following Over the Years." The Wire.

launched health awareness programmes, including eye camps, drug de-addiction seminars, and rural medical check-ups, the Dera cultivated further goodwill by addressing everyday vulnerabilities faced by rural communities. Record-breaking campaigns such as the Raktdaan Maha Abhiyan, widely publicised as one of the world's largest blood donation drives, amplified this narrative of mass welfare. Individuals who participated often described these events as transformative experiences, framing their involvement in moral terms rather than as formal recruitment.[26]

Thus, participation became a form of embodied devotion, blurring the line between service and spiritual practice. Goffman's concept of total institutions manifested through DSS's regulation of routines, symbolic attire, specialised greetings, and normative expectations. These practices blurred boundaries between individual autonomy and institutional authority, making DSS the primary frame of reference for members' identities.[27]

Singh's films, such as: The Messenger and its sequels, portrayed him as a heroic figure. These films were widely screened, especially in semi-urban and rural theatres in northern India, drawing enthusiastic audiences from within and beyond the Dera. His songs, many of which featured moral lessons, were played at rallies, weddings, and village festivals. Digital broadcasts through social media and DSS-run channels circulated daily messages, turning Singh into an omnipresent figure whose voice and image permeated both public and private spaces.

DSS promoted the rhetoric of caste equality, emphasising that devotion and moral conduct rather than social status defined spiritual worth. This message resonated strongly with marginalised individuals. DSS also advanced an unconventional form of secularism, presenting spiritual practice as compatible with broader civic responsibilities rather than confinement to ritual orthodoxy. This was reinforced through the leader's very name: "Baba Ram Rahim", meaning "Father and Mercy of God". By framing himself as both a paternal spiritual and moral guide, Singh positioned DSS as surpassing traditional religious boundaries. This combination of egalitarian methods legitimised his authority and embedded the organisation into the everyday social lives of its members.

DSS also functioned as a practical social support system. It organised mass marriages for economically disadvantaged families. Legal-aid desks helped followers navigate local dispute cases in areas where formal legal services were inaccessible. Welfare support extended to providing food grains, clothing, and shelter assistance during hardship. For young people who faced unemployment, the Dera's offered a sense of discipline. Being associated with a large, politically influential organisation offered protection from bureaucratic neglect. For women, particularly in conservative rural regions, group membership provided social recognition and access to networks they might not

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[26] Sabrang India. "Understanding the Dera Sacha Sauda Phenomenon Gives Us Something to Really Worry About." September 5, 2017.

[27] Janis, Irving L. Victims of Groupthink. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.

have otherwise reached. Thus, Social Identity Theory further clarifies DSS's appeal: belonging to DSS meant joining a morally superior community distinguished from a corrupt outside world.[28]

Confession sessions, where followers disclosed personal struggles, created vulnerability and deepened dependency. These sessions reinforced Singh's authority as a moral arbiter with unique access to followers' inner lives. Ritual participations in kirtan and symbolic salutes generated Durkheimian collective effervescence. Emotional rewards included perceived spiritual healing, moral clarity, protection from external threats, and relief from psychological distress. These states heightened receptivity to suggestion and increased willingness to comply with DSS's expectations.

Under Singh's leadership, DSS expanded into a multi-sector institution comprising hospitals, schools, media studios, sports facilities, and agricultural enterprises. Political alliances were central to DSS's expansion. Singh mobilised substantial voting blocs, securing reciprocal patronage, protection from prosecution, and administrative support. These mechanisms created a tightly controlled environment where followers internalised organisational norms and perceived dissent as moral failure. DSS reproduced what Robert Lifton identifies as thought reform techniques, milieu control, sacred science, confession, and loaded language. [29]

Although DSS publicly championed women's empowerment, testimonies and investigations revealed patterns of coercion, masked by discourses emphasising protection and spiritual equality. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power became evident in DSS's moral regulation and internal policing of dissent.[30] It can be shown how DSS exercised moral regulation and internal policing by controlling members' sexuality, emotions, and moral conduct under the pretext of spiritual upliftment.

The 2017 conviction of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh marked a watershed moment for DSS; a formal legal verdict demolished the movement's long-promoted image of moral purity. On 25 August 2017, a special court of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in Panchkula found him guilty of raping two female followers in a case originally filed in 2002. The court sentenced him to two consecutive 10-year terms (20 years total), along with hefty fines and compensation to the victims.

Almost immediately, the verdict triggered a violent backlash from thousands of his supporters. Large crowds that had congregated in Panchkula to await the outcome erupted in rioting. Reports indicate that at least 30–38 persons died, and more than 250 were injured in the clashes. Security forces deployed more than 150 companies of paramilitary and police units, fired hundreds of rounds of tear gas, used multiple water-cannons, and detained over 1,500 supporters during the unrest. In the ensuing weeks and months, police and paramilitary sweeps recovered a large cache of weapons from areas

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[28] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory,"

[29] Shende, Mohnish. "Covert Thought Reform: Adapting Classical Models Across Political, Cultural, and Organizational Contexts." SSRN Electronic Journal, September 6, 2025.

[30] Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

linked to the Dera and its followers. Over 500–1,000 people were detained initially in connection with the violence; later, multiple First Information Reports were filed under sections ranging from rioting and unlawful assembly to criminal intimidation. [31]

A widely documented example of women feeling unsafe inside Dera Sacha Sauda comes from the anonymous 2002 sadhvi letter, which triggered the CBI investigation that ultimately led to Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh's 2017 conviction. In the letter and later testimonies, the woman described an atmosphere of psychological coercion and unquestionable obedience, where dissent was framed as a loss of faith and women were discouraged from contacting their families.

Media analysts note that for a large section of the Dera's base, the verdict was not accepted as justice but interpreted as a conspiracy by "anti-social elements" and "enemy media". This reframing provided a way to resolve the severe cognitive dissonance between perceived guru-virtue and court-documented crimes, preserving group identity and loyalty. The Dera's internal leadership responded swiftly: they cut off media access, organised loyalty gatherings, and distributed statements depicting Ram Rahim as a persecuted saint. Many block-level satsangs and house-to-house meetings were held to reinforce solidarity, a pattern reminiscent of what scholars of totalistic cults call "thought-reform" or identity-reinforcement techniques.[32]

Even as Ram Rahim was jailed, the Dera's social welfare wings continued functioning. Its political alliances delayed aggressive state action against its structural interests. This institutional depth explains why DSS did not collapse. In recent years, Dera Sacha Sauda has remained an active and politically significant institution. Between 2024 and 2025, Singh received multiple bouts of temporary release occurring around election cycles, prompting widespread discussion about the political calculus behind his intermittent freedom.[33]

In 2025, DSS remains one of India's most resilient spiritual movements. The organisation's educational institutions, hospitals, sports facilities, and welfare committees remain fully operational. Political parties across the ideological spectrum continue to engage DSS due to its large, loyal voter base. Followers interpret each parole as a reaffirmation of their guru's innocence, preserving continuity of belief. DSS remains deeply integrated into local economies and civic life in Haryana, signifying advanced routinisation of charisma, where bureaucratic and communal structures outlive the leader's physical presence.

Conclusion:

This research proposal presents a comparative study focused on analysing the different paths of charismatic authority in two of the most significant spiritual movements in India. By placing Osho and Dera Sacha Sauda within a common theoretical framework of charisma, discipline, psychology,

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[31] Indian Express. "Dera Chief Convicted: Timeline of the Singh Case." August 28, 2017.
[32] Kaur, Manveen. "Gender and Power in Dera Sacha Sauda." Feminist Review 119 (2018): 89–108.
[33] The Hindu. "Patronage, Politics, Murmurs Resurface as Ram Rahim Ploughs His Own Furlough."

and institutional structure, the research aims to enhance understanding of why spiritual communities either fall apart or endure when faced with scandal.

The analysis indicates that charismatic authority cannot be understood only through personal charm or religious attraction. Rather, its persistence relies on how well charisma is integrated into organisational routines, psychological processes, symbolic actions, and political relationships. Osho's influence was linked to his personal presence and dynamic charisma. Conversely, DSS established a profoundly embedded type of charisma.

The psychological processes that drive follower loyalty, cognitive dissonance, identity fusion, groupthink, and internalised discipline further clarify how movements maintain commitment even when faced with contradictions. In Osho's situation, dissonance led to fragmentation as the movement lacked frameworks to manage uncertainty. In DSS, dissonance strengthened loyalty since institutional messaging quickly reinterpreted accusations as outside threats. This difference highlights the intricate connection between psychological vulnerability and organisational resilience.

Through the integration of sociological and psychological perspectives, the research aims to uncover the interplay between charismatic authority and the broader social context in modern India, characterised by spiritual ambiguity, political instability, and moral disintegration. Grasping why certain movements fail while others persist is crucial not only for the sociology of religion but also for assessing the socio-political hazards associated with broad charismatic organisations integrated into welfare, media, and political frameworks.

This research ultimately argues that charisma is not merely a personal attribute but a relational and institutional process. It becomes dangerous not only when leaders behave unethically but also when their organisations develop the capacity to protect them at any cost. By analysing Osho and DSS together, the study highlights the spectrum between liberation and discipline, spiritual experimentation and institutional control, and demonstrates the need for deeper academic engagement with charismatic movements in modern India.

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